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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HONG KONG 002197

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SUBJECT: DEMOCRATS WIN THE FRONTIER BUT MAY LOSE ON EXCO

REF: HONG KONG 1272

Classified By: Consul General Joe Donovan for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment: Emily Lau's "The Frontier" political movement came to an all-but-official end this past weekend, with Lau and her senior colleagues formally leaving the group and joining the Democratic Party (DPHK). While observers have long believed a consolidation of pan-democratic forces would strengthen the movement at the ballot box, no other parties or independents have lined up to join the DPHK, or each other. DPHK itself welcomes further mergers, and believes it could accommodate more incumbents despite an already-crowded electoral field. Coalition building among the democrats would be a healthy step toward building parties as institutions with "brand recognition" and the ability to train and develop political talent. It would also reduce the often personality-based divisions in the camp which have pitted democrats against each other during elections. Meanwhile, press speculation that a democrat will be chosen to join the Executive Council (ExCo) -- the Chief Executive's cabinet and political sounding board -- is dismissed by Lau and at least one of those reportedly under consideration. Appointing a democrat to ExCo would be an indicator that the Chief Executive is serious about finding a consensus policy on democratic reform. End summary and comment.

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The Frontier is Closed  
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¶2. (U) When journalist Emily Lau Wai-hing ran in the first Legislative Council (LegCo) election with directly-elected geographic seats in 1991, she won more votes than any other candidate and began her long tenure as a legislator (and the first woman elected to LegCo) from New Territories East. Placing second overall in 1995, she went on in 1996 to form her own political movement, the Frontier. The Frontier seated five members in both the 1998 and 2000 LegCo elections, including Lau herself, Cyd Ho, Leung Yiu-chung, Lau Chin-shek, and Lee Chuek-yan. By 2004, however, the others had departed to run under other banners (Lau Chin-shek and Lee for the Confederation of Trade Unions, Leung for the Neighborhood and Workers Service Center, Ho as an independent teamed with then-independent Audrey Eu), leaving Lau as the sole Frontier member in LegCo. The 2008 election saw Lau take the last of seven seats in the constituency, with press having speculated she might lose. Some weeks later, discussions opened between the Frontier and the Democratic Party (DPHK), and the parties joined forces November 27. In yet another first, Lau is the only woman to have served as a DPHK legislator.

¶3. (C) Emily Lau told us on the eve of the September elections she felt the democrats had never really coordinated their efforts and that each faction running its own slates was probably for the best. Now, however, she feels that eight separate organizations for a field of only 23 LegCo

democrats has room for "some consolidation", which she hopes will strengthen the pro-democracy movement. Press and our contacts see Lau's decision to join her often-estranged allies in the DPHK as having mostly to do with her near-defeat. With Lau widely expected not to run for LegCo again in 2012, observers think Lau sees joining forces as preferable to the Frontier retiring with her (the Frontier has three District Council seats and a membership of about 115, some of whom may choose to continue under the Frontier banner). While Lau is known for her uncompromising commitment to principles, DPHK strategist Professor C.K. Law suggests she has "mellowed" and seems more amenable to compromise now, thus making the merger possible. Emily Lau intends to run for a DPHK vice chairmanship on a three-way ticket with chairman Albert Ho and vice chairman Sin Chung-kai, and C.K. Law thinks it is premature to count her out of the 2012 LegCo elections.

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Further Consolidation?  
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¶4. (C) A question now is whether the DPHK could win over other members of the pan-democratic camp, with a DPHK-Civic Party (CP) merger the most discussed. C.K. Law told us the DPHK was open to joining with any of the other democrats, but expected few would want to give up their independence "right now". While Emily Lau stressed the importance of the merger being handled well so that others would not "refrain from joining", she also opposes "one party rule" and does not intend to encourage others to join the DPHK. CP strategist Professor Joseph Cheng didn't give us a clear answer about

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his party's plans, perhaps in part due to an imminent CP conclave to decide the party's future. Cheng did tell us he expects the democratic camp will coordinate fairly closely on the 2011 District Council elections, but that coordination for LegCo elections was more complicated. That remark, plus the lack of any public CP comment on forging a closer alliance with the DPHK, suggests the CP intends to continue as its own party for the time being.

¶5. (C) Independent Cyd Ho, who left the Frontier but remains close to Emily Lau, told us she supports the merger. Ho's history with the DPHK is bad: a last-minute appeal for votes to support Martin Lee's DPHK slate on Hong Kong Island is widely held to have drawn off the votes needed to re-elect Ho in 2004. Nevertheless, she hopes for greater solidarity among democrats, provided the coalition allows "toleration of diversity", an indicator she may consider following Lau. Inter alia, Lau's decision to join the DPHK led the pan-democrats to anoint Ho to replace Lau as convener of their "box lunch" caucus, on the principle that the convener should be independent of the DPHK or CP.

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Democrats in ExCo  
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¶6. (C) The media has speculated Chief Executive Donald Tsang might extend an olive branch to the democrats by offering a seat in the Executive Council (an inner cabinet including the chiefs of Hong Kong's executive branch bureaux, key legislators, and eminent persons). (Note: Former LegCo member Professor Anthony Cheung, who led democratic proto-party The Meeting Point and was a Vice Chair of the DPHK until 2004, is reckoned as a democratic voice in ExCo, but is not a current DPHK member. End note.) Two names which have been mentioned are both in the DPHK: strategist C.K. Law and DPHK vice chairman Sin Chung-kai. Both are senior party members and former legislators -- Law held the Social Welfare Functional Constituency seat until 2004, while Sin stepped down from the IT Functional Constituency in 2008. Were Sin to be re-elected party vice chair, Law would seem to be the more logical choice for both sides. Whomever Tsang

appoints (a ExCo re-shuffle is widely expected), Law anticipates the new appointments to be announced prior to Chinese New Year in late January.

17. (C) C.K. Law told us that, while he personally would prefer to avoid the demands of the post, he feels he would be unable to refuse the appointment for political reasons. That said, Law rates his or any other democrat's chances of appointment as low. On the one hand, he surprised us by saying he thought the government found the DPHK easier to deal with than its putative allies in the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB) and the Liberal Party, since DPHK did not demand political quid pro quo for its support on each issue. On the other hand, he thinks enough hardliners in both Hong Kong and Beijing object to a democrat on ExCo to prevent any appointment. (Comment: We have seen nothing to suggest the government regards the DPHK as easier to deal with than either the DAB or the Liberal Party. While both those "pro-government" parties have shown an increasing willingness to oppose the government when they find it politically beneficial to do so, both still publicly support constructive relations with the government. The Government, from the CE down, also still gives every indication it regards at least the DAB as its ally. On the other hand, some government officials have termed the pan-democrats as the "anti-government camp" in discussions with us. End comment.)

18. (C) Emily Lau also rated the prospects for a democratic appointment to ExCo as low. Even should Tsang chose to make a token appointment, Lau said he would choose from among the "softest" democrats like C.K. Law and Sin Chung-kai, whom she says have close links to the establishment. Appointing a token democrat to ExCo is "window dressing", Lau argues, since an individual bound by ExCo rules of confidentiality could not effectively represent a party. She called for a "coalition government" in which parties would serve in a real cabinet as heads of policy bureaux. (Note: Under SAR law, even "political appointees" are required to sever their links with any political party. End Note.)  
DONOVAN